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INTRODUCING PEERS TO A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES

By Ashlee Hespen

Tia Sandoval has been bitten by the travel bug and she loves to share her affliction. Sandoval is a Student Travel Consultant with the Ag Study Abroad office.

Three College of Agriculture and Life Sciences travel courses to China, Brazil and Ecuador are just the beginning of her international experiences.

The senior in animal science and international agriculture spent last spring semester in Brazil. While there, Sandoval, from Kansas City, Mo., polished her Portuguese skills and completed an independent study on poultry nutrition at the Federal University of Viçosa in Minas Gerais. She also taught an English conversational course.

"It can be difficult to learn a language from books or teachers, so I came up with different topics each week and led them in conversations," Sandoval says. "It was rewarding to see them progress in their English and become more conversational."

In order to share her experiences, Sandoval has worked as a Student Travel

Consultant with the Ag Study Abroad office since 2009. The student consulting program grew from suggestions by students in 2005 who wanted more interaction with students who had been abroad. Today there are five student consultants on staff.

"As a consultant, we share personal experiences from a student perspective so other students can relate to the program and find out more about studying abroad," Sandoval says.

Briana McNeal, a junior in global resource systems and nutrition, will be studying abroad on the same semester exchange program to Brazil next year.

"It was nice to listen to Tia's personal experiences rather than reading pamphlets from the school, because now I have a better idea of what to expect," says McNeal.

Each semester, the consultants provide valuable feedback to the Ag Study Abroad staff on what their peers are interested in, helping the programming to be more effective. Last year, 220 students participated in

Ag Study Abroad travel courses. Shelley Taylor, director of study abroad for the college, says the consultants play a critical role.

"Student travel consultants are insiders. Students consider the information more valuable coming from peers than from me," Taylor says. "This program is so valuable in recruiting. It is a crucial link in staying relevant to our goals."

Sandoval says she enjoys sharing what she has learned abroad.

"My experiences have taught me to be open minded," Sandoval says. "When you're in a new country or culture, it is important to keep an open mind, because they have different beliefs, cultural activities, food and ways of doing things. This gives me the opportunity to learn something new and also share what I know."

Sandoval has been nominated for Agriculture Extension in Sub-Sahara Africa with the Peace Corps, where she hopes to share her passion for agriculture in an international setting. 